**2 Gender identity and gender development**

**2.1 The development of gender identity**

In this section we are going to look at where we come from in terms of childhood experience and the development of gender identities in childhood. Gender identity involves the construction and use of gender categories. Children's gender categories are at first rather simplistic; but, as we shall see, children refine their categories so that they become more reliable and useful for their social lives. Studying the development of gender identity in children reveals that this is a story of a search for certainty. Self-categorisation is a necessary part of developing a gender identity. In exploring the formation of gender identity in children it would therefore be sensible to ask questions about children's construction and use of gender categories.

We look at four key questions:

* At what age do children display behaviour that suggests they are using gender categories?
* At what age can children categorise themselves (and others) as belonging to a gender category, and what does this categorisation mean to them?
* Are young children's gender categories different from those of adults, and if so in what ways?
* How are gender identities maintained in later childhood?

What evidence exists about children's use of gender categories? Children's preference for particular toys is some of the earliest behaviour indicating a categorisation of masculine and feminine. Preferences, behaviours or traits that mirror the views of one's society about what is masculine and what is feminine are termed **gender-appropriate**. Opting for gender-appropriate toys (masculine toys such as trucks, toolkits, and construction kits if one is a boy and feminine toys such as dolls, tea-sets, and domestic items if a girl) can usually be seen by 2 years of age. There is evidence that from 3 or 4 years, children are able to categorise toys as suitable for boys or girls, and knowledge of the gender-appropriateness of toys strongly influences preferences.

**Definition**

**Gender-appropriate**

Preferences, behaviours or traits deemed to be suitable or proper with regard to masculinity and femininity in a particular culture.



**Figure 2:** Some toys are considered to be appropriate for boys and others for girls

Our second question asked about children's ability to categorise themselves appropriately. Some researchers believe that consistent gender labelling is a particularly important milestone. Most children can categorise themselves appropriately and consistently as a boy or girl at some time between 2 and 3 years of age. Durkin (1995) describes this as a gradual process:

… the child slowly becomes aware that he or she is a member of a particular sex. At first, this knowledge constitutes little more than a label for the child, equivalent to a personal name. The child begins to discover which other individuals fall into the same category, and elaborates his or her gender labels to include terms such as man, woman, boy, girl. But knowledge is not perfect.

(Durkin, 1995, p. 180)

There is evidence that some important gender-appropriate behaviours result from the child's ability to categorise themselves as a boy or girl. Such behaviours include having a greater preference for same-gender peers. However, some gender-appropriate behaviours such as toy preference, as we have seen, occur before this milestone is typically reached. Once children are able to categorise themselves and others appropriately, they can draw upon (and build upon) their previously acquired knowledge to refine their construction of gender categories, and further develop their own sense of gender identity.

So from quite an early age children are able to categorise themselves as male or female. Perhaps this is early evidence of the formation of gender identity. What, though, does the label that children initially apply to themselves actually mean to them? What did Durkin (in the quotation above) mean when he noted that children's knowledge ‘is not perfect’? The answer to these questions depends upon evidence relating to our third question about the development of gender identity. This question asked whether the gender categories used by young children differed from those of adults. Learning more about the characteristics of children's gender categories can tell us more about the sorts of gender identity they are forming.

Research has found that gender categories typically constructed by young children under about 5 years of age have particular and distinct characteristics (Kolhberg, 1966). The evidence for this is revealed through mistakes that children make. They may, for example, suggest that girls can become uncles, and boys become aunts. In addition to misunderstandings about the stability of gender over time, children are often also fooled by context. If outward appearances change, if, for example, a man dresses in woman's clothing, or if a man engages in activities considered to be typically feminine, then children may consider such a man to have changed into a woman.